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TAGS: [SNAR](#) [PGOV](#) [KCRM](#) [GT](#)

SUBJECT: USG Assistance Positively Impacting Poptun; Playa Grande a
Playground for Narcotraffickers

REF: 09 GUATEMALA 766

CLASSIFIED BY: Todd Robinson, Charge, STATE, POL/ECON; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) Summary: During field visits to Poptun and Playa Grande

in northern Guatemala on September 28 and October 5, EmbOffs and official visitors observed the positive impact of U.S. Special Forces training of the Guatemalan Army's Special Forces Brigade and an elite police unit, and the joint forces' potential to successfully interdict transnational drug shipments in Poptun. However, this contrasted sharply with Playa Grande, further to the west on the Mexican border, where the Guatemalan Army unit did not have adequate resources to combat narcotraffickers who use the region as a transit point. In addition, it appeared that local communities around Playa Grande had been paid by narcotraffickers and refused access to police and military officials. Without USG support, it is unlikely that the Guatemalan government will be able to reassert its authority in areas like Playa Grande. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Two separate groups of EmbOffs and official visitors

travelled to Poptun military base, in the northern Peten Department, on September 28 and on October 5 to see the effects of U.S. Special Forces training of the Guatemalan Army's Special Forces Brigade (GEIR) and members of the National Civilian Police's Special Police Force (FEP). The training, which began in July 2009, includes basic marksmanship, communications, heavy weapons, medical training, small unit tactics, advanced urban training, air assaults, and mechanical and demolitions breaching.

Drug Shipments and Interdiction Efforts in Poptun

13. (C) According to a SF briefer, small single

or twin-engine aircraft regularly fly into Guatemala, primarily from Venezuela, carrying up to 1200 kilos of cocaine. Narcotraffickers land in clandestine airstrips and unload in approximately 7 minutes. Trucks prepositioned at the landing site transport the drugs through Mexico and on to the United States. An SF briefer noted that there is nearly a 100 percent success rate when landing at night.

¶4. (C) The GEIR/FEP receives actionable intelligence from the

Embassy's Tactical Analysis Team (TAT), the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S) liaison in Guatemala. Given the short reaction time, the GEIR/FEP relies on helicopter support from the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) or Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-Bravo), based in Honduras, to intercept planes with drug shipments headed to Guatemala. To make the GEIR more effective, U.S. special forces training officers noted that the GEIR/FEP needs consistent fuel supplies, standardized equipment for each GEIR/FEP member and more, and better, actionable intelligence to interdict incoming drug shipments. Working with law enforcement counterparts in Guatemala and in the U.S., the GEIR/FEP, TAT, and DEA's Guatemala City Country Office (GCCO) were able to confiscate 210 kilos of cocaine in August 2009 (Reftel).

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Overall, EmbOffs noted a strong esprit de

corps among the GEIR/FEP officers. It was clear that living on the Poptun military base with their U.S. counterparts had instilled a sense of purpose and belonging that the trainers noted has made them the premier anti-narcotics tactical team in Guatemala. However, the GIER needs better mobility and more timely cooperation from Guatemalan judicial authorities (e.g., in issuing arrest warrants) if it is to realize its potential. End Comment.

Playa Grande - Overmatched

¶6. (C) EmbOffs then visited the military base in Playa Grande,

located northwest of Guatemala City. In sharp contrast to Poptun, Playa Grande lacked the most basic resources. The base commander explained that their limited resources, including only two pick-up trucks and one truck, prevent them from adequately patrolling the area. Cooperation with local police and prosecutors is difficult since there are only five police officers and three prosecutors to cover the entire area. In addition, the base commander noted that there is a lack of trust in judicial authorities. On October 2, an alleged Mexican Zeta member (Zetas are the armed wing of Mexico's Gulf Cartel) travelling with fake ID documents was apprehended, taken before a judge and then released on October 5. The base commander observed that members of the Zetas had been in the area for approximately seven months and had established training areas. Compounding the problem, the allure of the narco-lifestyle draws in young people dazzled by flashy jewelry, vehicles and homes. Also, narcotraffickers have invested heavily in infrastructure and public works in these areas, demonstrating an ability to bring improvements to remote parts of the country, effectively supplanting the state. The base commander noted that local populations have started to turn police and military officials away from their towns. He believes that locals are paid by narcotraffickers to keep any state presence out of the area.

¶7. (C) In an effort to more efficiently capture and prosecute

narcotraffickers, the police have recently assigned two police officers to embed themselves in the Army detachment to promote cooperation on law enforcement activities. Guatemalan MFA desk officer Sandra Jovel who participated in the trip, added that patrolling border areas, like the one in Playa Grande, is a nearly impossible feat. Jovel said there are 43 known unofficial border crossings where large trucks easily cross undetected into Mexico. Of the eight official border crossings, only four are manned with border officials.

¶8. (C) EmbOffs overflew a large, well-maintained clandestine air

strip at Cuarto Pueblo, near Playa Grande. According to the UN-led International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), Zetas brought in heavy equipment and paid local inhabitants to clear and maintain the runway. According to the army, it is used regularly.

19. (C) Comment: The severe lack of resources present in the

Playa Grande area is alarming. Military officials, police, prosecutors and judges face almost insurmountable odds and cannot adequately combat drug trafficking organizations without basic resources like adequate personnel and vehicles. Training programs, such as the one in Poptun, directly support our objective of strengthening the state's ability to exercise effective control over its territory. For now, narcotraffickers continue to fill the vacuum left by a lack of state presence in outlying areas of Guatemala. End Comment.
ROBINSON